Media on the Edge of Nothingness: Visual Apostrophes in Lettrism

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It is commonly recognized that intermedial works of art may mediate information in ways that individual media are not capable. The intermedial work plays with different modes of signification and produces effects impossible for language alone. Peter Wagner defines intermediality as the practice of describing one medium by means of another. Wagner refers solely to ekphrasis, although intermediality is a complex phenomenon and requires that ‘medium’ is defined. Lars Elleström defines ‘medium’ based on the shared, yet dissimilar, qualities of media as communication. A ‘medium’ is a construct born and delimited in the process of definition. Thus intermediality – the engagement of more than one medium – highlights the constructedness of medial borders and establishes a kind of ‘border zone’.

Accordingly, media can be mixed in ways that struggle to overcome the construct nature of ‘intermedia’. Because the practice of applying many media differs from the scholarly term describing this practice, this essay seeks to ‘renegotiate’ intermediality in terms of artworks radically disrupting the coherence of the work itself. Coherence is always relative and the success of such disruption debatable, but by realizing these limitations we can study works that play with intermediality; while by doing so, artworks may also demonstrate the term’s inadequacy due to its constructedness. This essay argues that intermedial works play with nothingness and question the validity of signification in general by showing its limits with obscure techniques, including invented signs.

The themes of incoherence and nothingness form the base of the œuvres of the French Lettrist movement. The Lettrists’ interest in nothingness derives from preceding developments in philosophy and art. In France, the interwar era had made the theme of nothingness prominent in Sartrean existentialism as also in the Dadaist works of Tristan Tzara. Influenced by the trend in philosophy and aesthetics, Isidore Isou (Ion-Isidor Goldstein 1925–2007), the Romanian-born founder of Lettrism, published the manifesto of Lettrist poetry (Le Manifeste de la poésie lettriste, 1947), claiming that words could express none of the individual’s feelings, because words
were stereotypes. Isou criticized the inadequate means to mediate radically differing experiences.

There can be no certainty, however, regarding the fundamental similarity or dissimilarity of emotions due to the structure of communication. Language is based on concepts that are already generalizations, hence no comparison of the experiential is possible without objectification into language. Nevertheless, Isou’s definition of language as stereotypical communication manifests his profound distrust of this medium. He appears to consider language as inevitably exterior to the individual. Isou’s *Manifesto* implies that language sets the frames for the artist’s creative efforts although it should be the other way around. Therefore he focused on what language could not mediate: nothingness and the incomprehensible.

Furthermore, Isou tests how these motifs could be expressed *in writing*, seeking to subvert the notional language of logos to individual use of anti-conceptual language. Although Isou’s point of departure is utopian and highly problematic, his quest for individual expression results in a unique response to the modern crisis of language: ‘That what for preceding authors represented the dimension of silence and the unknown will become, thanks to me, the dimension of the known and of the new kind of speech’. Isou considers this ‘new speech’ the means to overcome the limits of language, which do not correlate with those of experience. However, Isou’s ‘new speech’ is inevitably in relation to language: what is defined as incomprehensible is incomprehensible only when one seeks to communicate it through notional language. Hence writing requires autonomy, distance from notional language, and Isou seeks to emphasize the *act* of writing so that Lettrist writing approaches writing on canvas. However, although he tries to recontextualize writing, Isou does not abandon the book, and hence Lettrist works create an intermedial tension between the written and the visual.

By prioritizing the act of writing Isou simultaneously effaces the mediating role of language. For him writing apparently deals with the arousal of connotations and pre-linguistic affects, toying with the reader’s ‘semiotic imagination’, engaging possible interpretations such that the markings acquire a plenitude of meaning – they can mean anything. This study concentrates rather on those qualities in Lettrist writing that seem to precede and/or resist objectification into language (see Figure 5). The concrete effects of such resistance are markings that appear meaningless and thus emphasize the medium itself. Lettrist writing must be treated as a special case of writing because it functions differently from notional language: its visual elements emphasize the presence of the text.

Visuality was highlighted from 1953 onwards by hypergraphics (*hypergraphie*), enabling artists to combine all known writing systems without a particular ‘grammar’ and invent ‘signs’ of their own. The invented markings are a method for distancing the act of writing from language. They are applied to express what defies expression in notional language, in the
Figure 5 An excerpt of Alain Satié’s ‘Sur le pont d’Avignon’. Courtesy of the artist

sense of being supposedly outside the production and application of concepts. In this light, invented markings are not based on ciphers and are at best quasi-iconic with no recognizable resemblance or convention to connect them with pre-linguistic experiences. The invented markings thus highlight the individual writer’s ‘presence’ in Lettrist writing, producing a tension when text is combined with invented markings. In such cases, Lettrist writing fragments conventional text by means of another medium. I call these interventions visual apostrophes. Besides indicating a missing letter or a word in the text, the original literal meaning of the word apostrophe (Greek: *apostrophos* ‘turning away’) is also preserved. In conventional text, the visual apostrophe represents a turn away from notional language that makes room for another medium. However, the visual apostrophe maintains its relation to language, because often the apostrophe is linguistically motivated: the apostrophe can replace a word or a letter and can hence be regarded as intermedial.

Furthermore, there is a third, subtler meaning of apostrophe. The Greeks used it to refer to an orator’s ‘turning aside’ to address some individual. In this context, the hypergraphics address the individual reader by showing him or her the limits of notional language, thereby leading him or her to reconstruct the meaning of invented markings. I suggest that this meaning of the apostrophe requires a departure from the intermedial approach, although the aforementioned definitions are necessary steps towards the other approach, meontology or the dynamics of signification and nothingness, which is studied in the third part of this essay.

The restrictions of the intermedial

Critical inquiry may not always benefit the complexity of an artwork, especially in the case of intentional ambiguity. This is because intermediality
makes certain fundamental ontological assumptions affecting the depiction of a work. One such assumption is that in the work there are at least two media differing in their ways of signification. For instance, verbal and visual signs differ in their mode of signification. In Lettrism, intermediality refers to the interaction between the two distinct media, namely the written and the pictorial. Hence, in order to approach such difficult cases of intermediality as that of hypergraphics, the work must be subjected to a certain deontologization.

Deontologization refers to the lowering or eventual removal of media borders, yet, as W. J. T. Mitchell argues, ‘all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous’. Mitchell means that writing too is visual and material. In addition, no modern pictorial work can avoid the text. Consequently, every intermedial work is subject to some degree of deontologization. In the context of this essay, however, deontologization is insufficient because Lettrist writing is not based on shared unproblematic representations. Hypergraphics suggests a manifold relation to language. On the one hand, hypergraphics is a form of visual expression, but visual only in the limits imposed by written language. Invented markings have the semblance of signs, because they are black and white and appear in contexts where written signification is found (see Figure 5). In short, they emulate the conventions of writing. On the other hand, invented markings fragment the text with their apparent lack of meaning. Once grasped in the context of language, the lack of linguistic signification is supplemented by invented markings apparently concealing their meaning. This supplementation engages the reader’s semiotic imagination. Yet the materiality of hypergraphics arouses a feeling of the presence of the text and of a presence ‘behind’ the text: someone in particular wrote these. Therefore, the more notional language fails, the more the presence of the unobjectified is pronounced.

Such presence manifests in the following visual apostrophe by Isou:

> The individual wanted to see the surfaces it spoke of and calculate them visually.

Although the particular apostrophe is not as advanced as those applying hypergraphics, it nevertheless emphasizes the co-presence of the visual and the written in the script. No linguistic meaning is lost by the introduction of the black rectangle. The fragment is intermedial – in the Wagnerian sense – in that the text emphasizes seeing and materiality through ekphrasis. The notional language discusses the visual element before the rectangle is introduced. In addition, the fragment also works as an iconotext. Wagner writes: ‘Iconotext refers to an artefact in which the verbal and the visual signs mingle to produce rhetoric that depends on the co-presence of words and images.’ Thus the rectangle is included in the sentence as a visual sign, which magnifies that quality through the text. Yet its mode of signification is
ambivalent. The rectangle may be either a mere self-referential presentation as in both cases above or it may be depicted as representation. In the latter case, an interpretation based on iconotextuality recognizes the black rectangle as comparable to note clusters in early twentieth-century modernist music.\(^21\) As such, the rectangle is a ‘condensation’ of every possible sign superimposed on each and obliterating individual markings.

These different modes of signification are not contradictory. The nature of the visual apostrophe is such that it presents a pause or a cut in the text, it shuns one medium in order to make way for another, but it may leave a trace of what is removed from the first. For example, consider replacing the rectangle with an adverb, such as ‘automatically’ (automatiquement). This supplementation is not linguistically necessary but possible and exemplifies how easily the rectangle is interpreted as something other than itself. Therefore, the lack of language or the traces of it are ambiguous in visual apostrophes and the ambiguity arouses the interpreter’s semiotic imagination.

The possibility of replacing the absent signified is insufficiently described by any deontologization of intermediality, because deontologization ignores the potential signification. The co-presence of different ways of signification occurs because coherent sign categories are based on certain distinct ways of signification. Deontologization explores both the reciprocal differences between sign categories (that is, verbal, visual) and their co-presence, but excludes the lack of a clearly defined signified.

Hypergraphic writing entails that the lack of signified not only prevents the definition of an unambiguous semiotic category, but this may also be deemed an intrusion of ‘pre-linguistic elements’ into notional language. This is to say that hypergraphics explores the possibility of ‘notionless’ writing. However, such a formulation is clearly paradoxical, because writing is by definition the mediation of ideas through concepts. Hypergraphics plays with this key idea in communication and deliberately engages the interpreter to seek meaning through connotations and associations, which the work neither affirms nor negates. This strategy of ambiguous signification suggests that the loosely definable connection of hypergraphics to existing sign categories should be analysed as such instead of cataloguing the various possible interpretations. Hence I coin a new term, meontology.\(^22\) It refers to the study of what remains outside notional language; to what has not yet been objectified or is beyond objectification. The perception of such a lack of concepts as nothingness is practical, because nothingness cannot be made into an object of thought. This is to say that nothingness does not lend itself to semiotic imagination, and as a counterweight to interpretation, it shapes the coherence of the artwork. As deontologization refers to diminishing the limits of what is present (signified), meontology focuses on the disappearance of distinct limits between what in representation is present and absent. In other words, instead of the iconotextual co-presence
of the verbal and the visual, meontologization is the ‘cooperation’ of presence and absence manifest in verbal and visual signs. By meontologization hypergraphics is understood as invented markings that are notionless, but have the potential to change. Meontologization prioritizes the actual coherence of the work and its possible disruptions instead of the hermeneutical assumption of its unity, which may lead to hasty interpretations.

How to do nothing with words

Although hypergraphics supposedly refers to what falls outside notional language, Isou’s theory is in many ways problematic. Due to his utopian attitude he sought to make the incomprehensible palpable by ‘writing nothingness’ (écrire le rien). Isou was undoubtedly referring to experiences beyond the limits of communication, yet he did not discuss the obvious problem of mediating something unobjectified. The existence of unmediated experiences is debatable, because if we experience something we do not simultaneously conceptually reflect it. Although the possible existence of such experiences is not denied, their mediation is certainly impossible, because it would require the objectification of the very experiences one seeks not to objectify. Mediation necessitates objectification, because the experiences cannot be present as such. In addition, the claim to ‘write nothingness’ is obviously paradoxical; how can material production, such as writing, produce nothingness? Undoubtedly these are problematical issues, which Isou ignores. However, intermediality or iconotextuality is a characteristic result of Isou’s search to express nothingness. When the signification of invented markings or any kind of signs is effaced, their visibility is emphasized. The reader then seeks to make hypergraphics meaningful as presentations – as abstract forms – or to interpret them as representations.

Due to the ambiguity of signification in Lettrist writing, Heidegger’s view of nothingness corresponds to visual apostrophes. He stated that nothingness can be surmised but not logically proven. That is, nothingness responds poorly to analytical thinking based on notional language. Hypergraphics is writing that defies interpretation and this resistance is both intentional and significant to the coherence of the work. In this case, hypergraphics is interpreted as an effort to mediate experiences that cannot be made into objects of thought, the challenge being not to interpret nothingness as something else. Arguably the visual apostrophe can be approached as nothingness. Its structure proves that what is taken away from representation is also a representation – as a trace of representation. Representation is the only way to approach nothingness, because nothingness cannot be presented. Meontologization further allows depiction of the trace of representation, the absence of a given signified, as an intentional effect in the work. In visual apostrophes, meontologization may indicate an absence or predict the anxiety about nothingness.
Alain Satié's work, 'Sur le pont d'Avignon' (On the bridge of Avignon) (1970, see Figure 5), exemplifies these functions.20 There are three discernible levels of writing and meontology elaborates their interaction. Firstly, the typewritten text forms the common level open to all. Secondly, the handwritten headline forms the individual level, because although written in French, another person cannot reproduce Satié's handwriting. Thirdly, the private level is formed by invented markings that disrupt sentences and even individual words. In this work hypergraphics is not intended to widen signification but to underline the shortcomings of notional language.

However, the work sporadically applies methods pointing to the absence of a particular element. For example, the fragment between the fourth and fifth lines (compa[]bales) suggests that the invented markings can be replaced only by the letter 'r', thus forming a readable word in French, comparables (comparable). The length of the 'imaginary cartouche' suggests a longer replacement than 'r' due to the sign-like nature of the fragment, which the reader identifies with language.27

As the 'r' seems to be the only logical replacement, in this case the hypergraphics leads us to search for an absent particularity. Such absence depends on our expectations of finding something that is not there.28 Therefore the nothingness in comparables is inherently particular, meaning that there is a trace of something particular that is absent. In some visual apostrophes the lack of language refers to absence, as in the example above. Moreover, invented markings resemble representations because the reader replaces the fragment with what it seems to stand for. The text around the visual fragment is motivated by the hypergraphics charged with semantic content. In addition to the meontological cooperation of presence and absence, the co-presence of words and images is essential. Hence, these examples may be called ico[notextual hypergraphics. The relation to other objects is established and the hypergraphic fragment becomes a quasi-linguistic sign. Thus visual apostrophes utilize the particularity of absence: the interaction between the common and the private levels is necessary, because individually the private level structures only an unfinished signification. Here something present mediates the absence of some particular, but what is missing can still be depicted.

The reconstruction of other parts of the composition is not equally uncomplicated, however. In places a whole word or multiple words are missing. For example, the invented markings on the second and third line in Satié's work suggest that the visual apostrophe either replaces multiple words or none at all. However, in the case of multiple missing words, the interpretation is more ambiguous than the previous one. Hence no univocal supplementation but only indeterminate possibilities can be found.

What if there is no appropriate unambiguous particular replacement? In the case of such profound indeterminacy, invented markings would not represent the absence of something in particular, but a more general nothingness. Then, Heidegger's notion of nothingness has a structural
homology with the visual apostrophe. According to him, beyond the limits of a whole there ‘is’ nothingness. Heidegger understood beings and things as finite, and therefore nothingness draws their very limits. Nothingness constitutes being and this constitution is known in anxiety. The anxiety derives from the limitedness of our existence and our awareness thereof. Therefore nothingness emerges as ‘a slipping away of the whole’.

The slippage undermines the coherence of the finite (an individual, an artwork). The hypergraphics evokes nothingness by showing the reader the limits of his or her being. The implied existence of personal experiences is revealed by invented markings, but the experiences remain radically other. According to this approach, invented markings are a vestige of the presence of the unknown other (writer, meaning) within the text. Moreover, visual apostrophes are not mere changes in media or modes of signification, but breaks in the coherence of the text revealing the absence of the writer and exposing the reader to the lack of language and meaning. The slippage of the whole results once the limits of being are foregrounded and we grasp that there is something beyond our field of knowledge.

By effacing meaning, though, Lettrist writing undermines the capability of language to correspond with the world it describes. Satie’s work does not radically question the limits of being but those of notional language. Hence, the work’s ‘meaningless’ visual apostrophes in fact criticize the assumption that the individual and experiential could be fully communicated through language. Such examples of visual apostrophes may be called notionless hypergraphics. In this case, the hypergraphics ‘deconstructs’ the co-presence essential to the iconotext because it establishes no coherent sign category. Therefore, in notionless hypergraphics the verbal and visual signs do not mingle, but proclaim their autonomy.

Iconotextual hypergraphics is subordinate to notional language because it replaces a grammatical sign (a letter, a word) in the text. However, if hypergraphics does not acquire equal grammatical motivation, the hierarchical relation between notional language and hypergraphics is the opposite. Notionless hypergraphics cuts the text, opening it to the reader’s semiotic imagination. The reader is called to fill in the blank, which means that through interpretations alone the blank can potentially become something other than nothingness. Furthermore, the lack of meaning in the artwork is in itself meaningful, thanks to its intentionality. Although hypergraphics challenges the capabilities of writing to serve as a medium and communicate by mediating information, meontology highlights hypergraphics as a medium that mediates the ‘presence’ of the unobjectified in the artwork. This unobjectified, however, can only be detected through the dynamics of meontology, which is present in the visual apostrophe.

Fundamentally, Satie’s work is fragmentary if the aspects of absence and nothingness are not taken into account and if iconotextual and notionless hypergraphics are not regarded as separate. The title refers to an impassable boundary, in Satie’s piece language also forms a bridge that enables
one to cross to the other bank at the end of the text, yet invented markings subject the bridge of language to constant disruption. To ensure a safe crossing, the actual bridge requires its missing pieces and likewise, meontologization supplements the bridge of language by showing what is not there.

Conclusion

Lettrist visual apostrophes demonstrate the absence and potential of nothingness by showing us our limits. By shunning language with invented markings, there is a feeling of concealed expression. This concealment causes the unfinished signification to emphasize the materiality of hypergraphics. The pure materiality of writing results in what Isou called ‘hidden signification’ (signification cachée). This hiddenness not only highlights absence, but also reveals the limits of being and, henceforth, arouses the anxiety of things eluding us.

The meontologization of Lettrist writing causes an effect of deficiency, as hypergraphics points out the limits of notional language. Such is the ultimate contribution of hypergraphics, although it disregards Isou’s utopian claims. We must realize that language exists because the things it denotes are not present. This practical view assumes that language enables us to discuss concrete absent things or abstractions that were never there. According to this idea, hypergraphics reveals the fundamental emptiness of representations in language by invented markings and unfinished significations, which highlight the unattainability of the intended meaning. In other words, although the intended meaning is always inaccessible, hypergraphics foregrounds the separate realities of individuals instead of producing a fictive one. Thus the empty representations evoke an anxiety of different, yet simultaneous, realities where the slipping away of the whole becomes evident.

However, hypergraphics implies another result of meontologization: invented markings merely propose their own meaninglessness without affirming it. Accordingly, it may be concluded that unfinished signification is the very possibility to represent. From the perspective of notional language hypergraphics signals that something is taken away – from representation – in which case the possibility to represent is simultaneously a vestige. As such, the pronounced presence of hypergraphics brings about the possibility of experiences that cannot be made into objects of thought. Therefore, to neglect the meontologization in artworks is to neglect the philosophical power of works of art.

Notes

2. Cf. Elleström and Jørgen Bruhn, in this volume.
4. This essay is a part of the project Literature, Transcendence, Avant-Garde, funded by the Academy of Finland (1121211).
7. Isou criticized media as means of communication, but the concept ‘medium’ was understood rather conventionally in Lettrism.
12. The genre of the work is also bound to the technical requirements of a given medium (cf. Rajewsky, in this volume).
14. I call ‘signs’ invented by the writer ‘invented markings’ to avoid confusing their sign-like nature with actual signs. ‘Hypergraphics’ refers to the combination of every kind of sign system and therefore I rather apply ‘invented markings’, which also emphasizes the act of mark-making.
20. Wagner (1996) *Icons, Texts, Iconotexts*, p. 16. Wagner’s definition of iconotext is congruent with some approaches to intermediality introduced in this volume (cf. Jørgen Bruhn). However, I retain iconotext in order to distinguish between the numerous intermedial ways in which hypergraphics criticizes language.
21. Henry Cowell pioneered the technique in *The Tides of Mananaun* (1917). In France, especially Olivier Messiaen applied note clusters in the early 1940s.
22. Meontology, from Greek to mé on ‘nonbeing’.
23. Isou (2000) *La dictature lettriste*, p. 16. Isou may have absorbed this rhetoric from negative theology, which also struggled with the mediation of inexpressible experiences. In addition, linguistic negation and absurd texts diffuse ambiguous
uses of language. However, in nonsense literature and negative theology, for
instance, distrust of language does not manifest as radically as in invented mark-
ings. Here I treat as nonsense and negative theology such texts that rely on
conventional language although invented markings can be regarded as non-
sensical and were also utilized in different branches of mysticism. However, it
is difficult, if not impossible, to depict the genre of texts that apply invented
markings.

Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press).


26. The title has a double reference to the real world. The bridge of Avignon is a
historical site and ‘Sur le pont d’Avignon’ is a traditional French song.

27. This is a case of confusion between ‘visual’ and ‘iconic’ (cf. Elleström, in this
volume).

28. See J.-P. Sartre (1943) L’être et le néant: Essai d’ontologie phenomenologique (Paris:

29. The ‘whole’ refers to all entities whose meaning to us constitutes our world. Cf.
Heidegger (1993) Basic Writings.

30. Ibid., p. 102.

31. For a similar non-totalizing strategy cf. Sándor, in this volume.

Part IV

Mediations and Transformations of Media
In 1934, the Swedish artist Oscar Reutersvärd created, with an uncommon arrangement of cubes, what has become known as an ‘impossible triangle’. In 1980, the Swedish government honoured the inventive artist by commissioning photographs of three of his works for Swedish stamps. The stamps were produced in 1982 and issued for about two years.

Twenty years after his Swedish counterpart, in 1954, the British mathematical physicist Roger Penrose (born 1931), after attending a lecture by the Dutch graphic artist M. C. Escher, rediscovered the impossible triangle, drew it in what is today its most familiar form, and described it in a 1958 article published in the British Journal of Psychology. Penrose’s impossible triangle, unlike Reutersvärd’s earlier version, was drawn in perspective, which added a further paradox to the figure.

Penrose described the ‘tribar’ as ‘impossibility in its purest form’. It does indeed contain various dimensions of impossibility: its three straight beams meet at right angles at the vertices of the triangle they form, and the three surfaces of each beam are also at 90 degree angles to one another. In the context of intermediality the object seems thought-provoking for its strictly non-hierarchical nature. No face of any of the three arms can be said to be privileged in that it is ‘always front’ or ‘tracing the inner circle’. Instead, each of them constantly changes its spatial designation and its apparent visual reality, as so many surfaces in M. C. Escher’s drawings typically do. This essay, then, is a meditation on various art forms, media and modalities – thoughts that are inspired by this and other triangles. In particular, I hope to incite discussion of a number of questions concerning the angles linking the three beams in another strange triangle – what is often referred to as the ‘artistic triangle’. I will end by analysing and interpreting the three-step intermedial transposition of a work created by an uncle of the designer of the tribar, the British Surrealist painter Roland Penrose.¹
Various artistic triangles: options at the creator’s angle

Some time ago I undertook an in-depth study of an opera by the American composer, Philip Glass. The opera is entitled Satyagraha. In terms of the dramatic action developed on stage, it deals with the early life of Mahatma Gandhi and his development of the movement of non-violent resistance in South Africa. The lyrics, however, are entirely taken from the ancient Indian poem, Bhagavad Gita. Thus my task, before even commencing the analysis of Glass’s music, was to understand how the ancient poetic dialogue between a divine avatar and the warrior relates to an early twentieth-century story of racial discrimination, and how particular verses from the Gita may inform and reflect this particular instance from Gandhi’s struggle for human dignity under a white supremacist government.

In the middle of my several weeks of reading up on the Bhagavad Gita, and entirely unrelated to my work on Glass, I was invited to participate in a panel discussion on the topic of the relation between the Trinity and the ‘artistic triangle’, which is understood to consist of (a) artistic creator, (b) performer or mediator and (c) audience or beholders. While I knew, of course, which Trinity was being referred to, I found myself inspired to think of the question in terms of the Hindu trinity. This in turn led me to a different kind of artistic triangle, which I have since come to consider a foil in an impossible dimension of the well-rehearsed one, linking (a) art as an offering with (b) art that is passionately involved in the world and (c) art that ‘constructively destroys’ or dethrones.

The first deity in the Hindu trinity is Brahma, the Creator. Brahma creates the world as a kind of offering. Having created it, Brahma is no longer involved in the world, neither imposing rules nor fixing problems, neither punishing nor rewarding. The second deity in the Hindu trinity is Vishnu, the Preserver. Vishnu is supremely concerned with the world, incarnating again and again to help remedy what human beings invariably mess up. (Krishna, one of the protagonists in the Bhagavad Gita, and Rama are perhaps the best known incarnations or avatars of Vishnu.) Finally there is Shiva, the Constructive Destroyer. Shiva destroys so that new things may arise; it is said that Shiva ‘dances the world to pieces’. Shiva is also very much interested in abstractions and in philosophical conceptualizations.

The artistic triangle that emerged in the context of my reflections on the Hindu trinity may be seen as intersecting with the more familiar triangle of artistic creator, performer or mediator and audience. One corner of my alternative artistic triangle would be taken up by art and music that serve as an offering; Byzantine icons and religious mosaics come to mind just as much as hymns whose composers have remained anonymous. This kind of artistic attitude relates to Brahma. A second corner of my triangle would be occupied by art and music that is passionately and compassionately involved with the human world. This includes art exploring human
bodies (such as Michelangelo's *Vitruvian Man*) and art representing the world in which humans live - from the interiors of Vermeer and other Flemish artists to Romantic representations of small man in overwhelming nature, music that incorporates human dances, folksongs and the like, all the way to the nineteenth-century dramas and novels. This attitude relates to Vishnu. Finally, there is the artistic attitude that 'constructively destroys': art that dethrones the idea of representation, music that dethrones overtone-based harmonies, literature that dethrones the idea of a logically developed plot or a fully impersonated protagonist with whom readers can identify. This art corresponds to Shiva in that it may become increasingly concerned with conceptualizations, either by turning to abstract modes of communication or by engaging irony, as Lars Elleström has shown so persuasively in his book *Divine Madness*.²

The beauty of this triangle is that just as the three corners are not unrelated points in space but linked as the three sides of a strictly contained geometric figure, the three attitudes are intricately interrelated. A work of abstract music may well be created in the spirit of an offering, as may be a representational still-life and so on, but then, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are really three aspects of a godhead that is essentially One: Trimurti.

**The limits of perception: obstacles at the beholder's angle**

With regard to what is more commonly called the artistic triangle, one question has haunted me for a long time: how and to what extent does it matter whether or not the audience can see, hear or in any other way grasp details, structures and intentions, or whether these only become apparent with the aid of notation or analysis? In a masterpiece of literature, music or plastic art, a first exposure will typically only reveal a general impression and a fragment of the extant details. Renewed exposure and atypical approaches can and usually will take the beholder's appreciation to ever deeper levels. This includes reading a work of literature not consecutively but selectively or by comparing disjunct passages, looking at the score of a musical composition rather than only listening to the sounding realization, voicing the thoughts that possibly inform the visual images in a painting and perhaps extrapolating from them into realms beyond the visually represented. There is thus a development on the beholder's side from perception to an understanding of the deeper signification and possibly on to a sense of a work's transcendent meaning. From a first glimpse at this third corner, considerations will return to the level of perception and retrace the triangle a number of times, in the manner that Gadamer described for the hermeneutic circle.

If one were to arrange artworks along a spectrum that spans from those to which access is immediate all the way to those that appear exceedingly complex, veiled and layered, one would find oneself confronted with extreme questions. At the one end there are creations, presumably in any medium
and modality, which may reveal no more at prolonged or repeated exposure than at the very first glance. At the other end, there are works whose allusions and significations can only be ‘understood’ by specialists. Works belonging to the one extreme may collapse the artistic triangle to a two-dimensional relationship, as there may be no need or justification for any ‘mediation’, and where a musical composition still requires a performer in order to be heard, this unfortunate go-between may seem flattened to a presence that is, psychologically and spiritually, paper-thin. At the latter end, one may wonder where creative artists on the one hand and audiences on the other draw the line between what can be understood and what needs to be understood?

Case study 1: sensually or intellectually inaccessible spiritual signifiers

I would like to give two examples from my own field, music. In both cases, neither the signifier nor the signified are utterly mysterious for anybody, even those who know almost nothing about music. One of the phenomena is impossible to grasp without conscious knowledge, the other is only ever felt subconsciously.

In 1991, the British composer John Tavener (born 1944) composed an opera about a fifth-century desert hermit revered as St Mary of Egypt. The work bears the subtitle ‘an ikon (sic) in music and dance’, thus alerting us to the fact that it combines various art forms. It involves not only music, drama and stage design as all operas typically do, but also includes dance, as some works did since the beginnings of the genre in the early seventeenth century. Moreover, this opera makes reference to a kind of visual representation that has no connection to music-drama: the icon. Tavener, a member of the Orthodox Church since 1977, and his librettist, Mother Thekla, the abbess of an Orthodox convent, had many levels in mind when they decided to use an icon as a frame for their representation of an ancient penitent. On the literal level, they envisage a three-panelled icon on stage. At the beginning of the performance, the outer panels are closed in on the central panel (see Figure 6).
When the two wings open a few minutes into Act I, the space inside them is occupied by the two main characters: on the left, Mary who gives herself up to the pleasures of a sensuous life in Alexandria, and on the right, a devout monk in his monastery in Palestine who will eventually learn from her that there is a devotion greater and more God-pleasing than his self-righteous piety. The separate, parallel arrangement in the triptych’s two opened side panels is maintained throughout the first half of the opera. The work’s second half then takes place in the central panel, which represents the desert where the penitent’s and the monk’s worlds intersect. Shortly before the end of the final act, the icon panels close again, presumably allowing us to comprehend that while the particular story is completed, the larger one (and the music, for a little while) continues.

When Tavener refers to his work as a ‘living icon’, he has more in mind than simply the visual aspect. The music is as stylized as the stage setting and acting, described as using ‘primary colors as the icon painters do’. Tavener’s ‘musical icon’ presents a fascinating compendium of musical symbols. The entire composition is crafted from a limited catalogue of ten components, distinguished by tonal arrangement, metric organization, melodic features and timbral realization, with very little overlap between one group and the other. Of the ten musical elements, five are introduced ‘before the curtain rises’ as it were, that is, before the icon’s side panels on stage swing open and reveal the protagonists. These five musical elements must thus be comprehended as signifiers of an eternal, never-changing, divinely inspired universe that exists before, during and after the particular human story. Once the stage scenery has become visible, they are complemented by five thematic components that embody the players in the dramatic action.

The first musical symbol that listeners consciously perceive while the stage still suggests – to those who have eyes to see – the extra-dramatic world of the closed icon, is a sequence of chiming sounds created by hand bells struck with soft sticks. The performance indication requests that they ring ‘with unearthly stillness’ and allows freely chosen distances of 1–2 seconds between the individual strokes. The sequence, encompassing 25 notes, is built as a palindrome, that is, in perfect horizontal symmetry (see Figure 7).

Musical palindromes are interesting above all for their spiritual significance. In the realm of human experience, the irreversibility that defines all acts, be they physical or linguistic, the irreversibility that defines the course of a day or life and the expected execution of a plan, are of a quality

![Figure 7](http://site.ebrary.com/lib/iub/Doc?id=10431627&ppg=154)
intrinsically different from reminiscences, regrets, nostalgia and other acts or feelings turned toward the past. Imagining a point where this distinction no longer applies means leaving the realm of time as humans know it – that time which, together with space, provides the coordinates for life in our universe. On this ground, musical palindromes offer themselves as signifiers of timelessness, of the annihilation of time or, in a religious context, of eternity. The device is also associated with connotations of perfection, an essential quality of the Divine.

If the effect of symmetrical designs in works of visual art is one of balance and aesthetic pleasure, the result of similar mirroring processes in art forms that evolve in time is quite different. Whenever the segment that will turn into its own retrograde comprises more than five or seven – at most, nine – notes, the resulting symmetry is beyond the grasp of human listeners. In other words: the distinguishing attribute of this melodic line has a profound spiritual meaning, which however lies outside the perceptive faculties of all human beholders. Although each note, and the succession, is easy to hear, the line’s overall shape, and with it its transcendent message, are not. (Spiritually speaking, it is of course utterly appropriate that we should not be able to perceive what is by definition outside of human experience.)

The opera’s very first signifier escapes listeners for a different reason. It is in fact the most pervasive sound phenomenon in the composition: a protracted drone on the pitch F. This sound seems to emerge imperceptibly from the silence preceding the composition and to vanish equally gently back into this silence. In the music of the Byzantine rite, such a drone is used to accompany liturgical singing. With regard to the spiritual message conveyed in this opera, it stands for the eternal presence of God, impermeable no matter what happens. With regard to Tavener’s ‘musical icon’, it is analogous to the golden background that surrounds painted images in the icons of the Orthodox rite. Just as the faithful praying in front of a visual icon will focus on the stylized features of the saint and largely neglect the backdrop, so also in this music: the drone is so unimposing that it seems to fade out of the hearing range of listeners. It is only interrupted when, on three successive occasions, Mary threatens to become entirely disconnected from God. In these instances, even lay listeners who claim to have had no conscious awareness that there ever was such a backdrop sound comment that ‘something intangible has changed’.

**Interpretation or digression: risks and freedoms at the mediator’s angle**

In the two examples discussed above and in many others, performers and conductors can do nothing to facilitate the audience’s access to the signification that is being offered. In other cases, interpretation makes all the difference, and it therefore matters what and how much the interpreter...
understands. In particular, genres involving a multiplicity of media raise the question of the role of choreographers and opera directors. Many an operatic staging captures the audience so powerfully through visual images – especially where video projections are added to real-time actions on stage – that the music is relegated to the role of a cinematographic soundtrack: a sonic tapestry that is meant to highlight the emotional qualities of a story presumably told primarily through verbal and visual means. While that may be fine in the case of works that are composed with just this effect in mind, one wonders whether it is equally appropriate in the case of operas whose music speaks a language rich in hermeneutic baggage? Does not an approach privileging visual effects thwart the audience’s potential access to the musically conveyed messages?

A related question concerns choreographers wedded to the late-twentieth-century concept of ‘non-redundancy’ and therefore striving for, as one of them explained to me, ‘a dance that dialectically engages rather than duplicates the music’.6 After the first thrill of this ‘dialectic engagement’ wears off, such choreographers often receive feedback telling them that the disjunction they create is such that spectators can only take in the dance if they tune out the music as one would the muzak in a restaurant during an interesting conversation with a friend.

Reflections on the immediate versus the successively revealed disclosure of a work’s message inevitably lead to the role of the mediator. If the performance of a work, while no doubt a creative act, is meant as an ‘interpretation’ that facilitates rather than veils the beholders’ access to the conveyed signification, then musicians, actors and dancers, would ideally invite their audiences to respond to the primary artwork’s content, rather than to their skills. This raises a question regarding a medium that seldom speaks through interpreters: plastic art. Is the fact that visual artists do not (normally) rely on, much less depend on, interpreting mediators, only an advantage or can it also sometimes foreclose avenues of access? How do artists feel about the (still fairly unusual, always secondary, but often most interesting) interpretation of a work of theirs in poetry, music or dance? And this is only one of the many ways in which a primary representation is re-presented in another medium?

In the final component of my essay, I will briefly discuss a musical piece based on a poem that responds to a painting, in other words: a song whose lyrics are an ekphrasis and whose music adds a novel perspective to what James Heffernan has succinctly called ‘a verbal representation of visual representation’.

Case study 2: musical signifiers enriching an ekphrastic poem

In 1937, the English painter Roland Penrose, who had worked in the Parisian Surrealist circles for many years and introduced Surrealism to the
British Isles, completed a canvas alternatively entitled Voir c’est croire (Seeing is Believing) or L’île invisible (The Invisible Isle). The painting shows simultaneity of night and day. At the top, a dark sky with a new moon, a few stars and white clouds seem to bleed out into the shoulders of a young woman whose head hangs upside-down, covering much of the central section, which is bathed in sunlight. Her wavy blond hair spills into the ocean below her and forms the backdrop and visual enclosure for a small, rocky island occupied by more buildings than the limited space seems able to hold. One distinguishes a port with the masts of sailing boats. The reflections on the water suggest bright weather; at the same time, the sky at the right-hand side releases a sheet of rain. From the barely suggested shore in the foreground, two hands in a size roughly corresponding to the scale of the woman’s head reach up – one real, the other a mere shadow. Their gesture is vertically directed toward the lovely face but horizontally separated from it by the expanse of water and the depth of the island.

The French composer Olivier Messiaen, a contemporary of Penrose, saw a reproduction of the painting in the Swiss art magazine Forme et Couleur and included his response to it as number ten in a cycle of 12 songs for dramatic soprano and piano, Harawi, composed in the summer of 1945. Messiaen loved the poetry of Paul Eluard, Pierre Reverdy and André Breton. For the five song cycles he composed during the years 1936–48, he wrote his own poetry, in a style that became ever more Surrealist. His interest in Surrealist art was of a very particular kind, however: a devout Catholic fascinated with miracles and supernatural occurrences of any kind (from fairytales to biblical stories), he searched for the religious dimension in non-real representations. Here is the poem Messiaen wrote in response to Penrose’s painting, together with my translation.

X – ‘Amour oiseau d’étoile’
Oiseau d’étoile,
Ton œil qui chante,
Vers les étoiles,
Ta tête à l’envers sous le ciel.
Ton œil d’étoile,
Chaines tombantes,
Vers les étoiles,
Plus court chemin de l’ombre au ciel.
Tous les oiseaux des étoiles,
Loin du tableau mes mains chantent.
Étoile, silence augmenté du ciel.
Mes mains, ton œil, ton cou, le ciel.

‘Love Star-Bird’
Star-bird,
Your eye that sings,
Toward the stars,
Your head reversed under the sky.
Your star-eye,
Falling chains,
Toward the stars,
Shortest path from the shadow to the sky.
All star-birds,
Far from the scene my hands sing.
Star, increased silence of the sky.
My hands, your eye, your neck, the sky.

(Olivier Messiaen, ‘Amour oiseau d’étoile’, from Harawi: chant d’amour et de mort)
Messiaen’s poem suggests that he interpreted Penrose’s painting as symbolizing the relationship between earth/water and sky/heaven, between body and spirit. He describes the young woman’s head as ‘reversed under the heaven’, believes her eyes to be ‘singing toward the stars’ and her freely falling hair (‘falling chains’) to be mediating between the painting’s two worlds. He identifies with the hands in the foreground, which he knows to be ‘far from the scene’ defined by the woman linking night sky and sunlit island. The poem’s final line traces the central images once again in their upward-leading path: ‘My hands, your eye, your neck, the sky’.

The poetic text also includes several of Messiaen’s favourite terms, even though what they describe is not evident or at least not explicit in Penrose’s painting: bird, song, star and silence. In the beginning, the poetic voice addresses the young woman as ‘oiseau d’étoile’ (star-bird); later, as the speaker turns to the hands that represent him, he takes up the image by alluding to ‘Tous les oiseaux des étoiles’ (all star-birds). The inner connection between eye, singing and star, established in the symbolic imagery of the woman’s eye singing ‘toward the stars’, finds its equivalent on the interpreter’s side when his observation that his hands sing leads immediately back to the stars. The attitude expressed in the longingly raised hands and their distance to the intuited closeness ‘of shadow and heaven’ accounts for the increased silence of the heaven.

The music Messiaen composed for this song imports its own nuances of interpretation. Some of them are universal, others could be described as a kind of idiosyncratic semiosis typical of this composer at the period when he wrote this song cycle, and a third category relies on our recognition of a specific musical quotation (or rather, a paraphrase) of material for which Messiaen is well known.

I would like to begin with the third category, so that I can lead readers from the specific to the universal. One year before he composed the song cycle Harawi, Messiaen had written a cycle of twenty pieces for piano solo entitled Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus. That cycle thus celebrates various contemplations of the child in the manger or gazes cast on the infant Jesus. The principal cyclical theme in this composition is labelled in the score: thème de Dieu, ‘theme of God’. Its basic phrase consists of five chords. The melody harmonized with these chords is very simple, consisting of a three-note repetition, a climax a little higher and a return to the earlier pitch. The rhythm of this little phrase is also very simple: attacks of the three-note repetition are all equal in length, the climax is twice as long and the final relaxation, three times as long. The tempo of this piece – as it were: the temporal dimension of God’s eyes falling on the infant Jesus – is extremely slow: Messiaen imagines each of the repeated, ‘faster’ note values to last for three normal heart beats.

In the song ‘Amour oiseau d’étoile’, the main line – ‘Oiseau d’étoile’ – is composed in the same key as ‘Regard du Père’ and has almost exactly
the same melodic line as the ‘theme of God’, except that the note repetition occurs on the level of the climax, not on that of the release. Also, the rhythm is slightly changed: instead of beginning with three beats of equal length followed by ever longer note values, the duration now increases incrementally all along (that is, instead of counting 1-1-1-1-2-3-one now counts 1-2-3-4-5-5-5-5-5). This is the thematic link: a kind of varied quotation. There is also a direct structural link: the initial movement of the piano cycle, devoted to ‘The Father’s gaze on the infant Jesus’ and focusing entirely on the ‘theme of God’, is formed in accordance with the triad of the Pindaric ode, with two stanzas (strophe and antistrophe) rounded off by a substantial coda (epode). The same layout is found in the song ‘Amour oiseau d’étoile’.

The second realm of musical signification in Messiaen’s song on the poem he wrote in response to Penrose’s painting is a case of what I like to call idiosyncratic semiosis. This aspect begins on the level of the poem and continues in the music. Olivier Messiaen was a bona fide ornithologist who is today recognized worldwide as the person who has most accurately transcribed the song of hundreds of birds. From the 1950s onward, Messiaen wrote a number of compositions exclusively devoted to the musical representation of bird calls, with some sonic descriptions of the birds’ characteristic habitat: Le Merle noir (The Blackbird), 1951, for flute and piano; Révell des oiseaux (Awakening of the Birds), 1953, for orchestra, piano and gamelan; Oiseaux exotiques (Exotic Birds), 1956, for orchestra, piano and gamelan; Catalogue d’oiseaux (Catalog of Birds), 1958, for piano; La Fauvette des jardins (The Garden Warbler), 1970, for piano; Des Canyons aux étoiles (From the Canyons to the Stars), 1974, for orchestra and soloists; Petites Esquisses d’oiseaux (Little Bird Sketches), 1985, for piano; Un Vitrail et des oiseaux (A Stained-glass Window and Birds), 1986, for orchestra, piano and gamelan.

All through his life, Messiaen interpreted the music of songbirds as a sign of God’s presence in nature. During the 1940s in particular, however, when the song under discussion originated and his birdsong transcriptions were not yet fully developed, he often used birds to signify human silence, especially the silence filled with awe in view of the transcendent. Indeed, ‘birds appear in the title of Messiaen’s poem, ‘Amour oiseau d’étoile’ (‘Love Starbird’) and recur in several lines, although I have not been able to detect a single bird in Penrose’s painting. For birds, one may thus read ‘silence’. In the music of the Penrose-inspired song, the birds rejoice in the piano after every single phrase.

The most significant representative of the first, universal category of interpretation in this song is an element of musical symmetry. This time, however, the symmetry is vertical and not horizontal, spatial and not temporal. Thus there is no constitutional hurdle for human understanding, as in the case of a sequence read backward. While most of us will still not necessarily grasp details about the relative distance between simultaneously
sounded pitches when hearing a chord, it is a strange fact that almost all people can, somehow, hear and recognize the effect created, especially the one achieved in the most frequently used vertically-symmetric chord. The technical description of this chord is not essential here; for musicians, its basic form is a major triad with added sixth, in first inversion. For an easy way of making this vertical symmetry of sounds visual, it is helpful that Messiaen uses only, and always when he uses this chord, the one in F♯ major, and in this key, the chord even looks symmetric on any keyboard of a piano, organ, xylophone and so on (see Figure 8).

In the piano piece ‘Regard du Père’, the very same chord is heard as a concluding chord repeated 24 times. A little later in the piano cycle, the chord also participates in another prominent theme, one that Messiaen’s score identifies as thème d’amour, ‘theme of love’. As a result of this dual appearance in the gazer of the loving heavenly Father and in the ‘theme of love’, I like to speak of this chord itself – the chord that is vertically symmetrical both in its interval structural and in its visual appearance on the keyboard – as the ‘chord of love’.

This brings me to another word in Messiaen’s poem that is not entirely explained by Penrose’s painting: the word ‘love’, which appears only, but very prominently, at the outset of the title ‘Amour oiseau d’étoile’. If the remainder of Messiaen’s poem does not explicitly stress the quality of love, Messiaen’s music does so all the more. For listeners, the predominant symbolic message the composer conveys in this piece resides in the conclusion of each phrase. The first ten segments of the song (eight in the stanzas and two more at the beginning of the coda) each conclude with two F-major six-five chords; the coda’s two final segments each add one more instance of the characteristic chord. More than half of these harmonically equivalent chords are cast in a vertically symmetrical format, thus appearing as variants of Messiaen’s ‘chord of love’.

One could expand this symmetrical chord by repeating one or more pitches on either side. Messiaen does so with considerable regularity, mostly adding the same number of pitches above the piano chord’s highest and
below its lowest note. The composer uses the vertically symmetrical chord of love at the end of every vocal phrase, in different expansions. In the coda's long final phrase, the chord on the downbeat of m. 23, which provides the backdrop for the most extensive bird song in this piece while separating the summary remark ('My hands, your eye, your neck, the sky') from the body of the poem, presents the most expansive of the vertical symmetries: a chord of ten vertically symmetrical pitches. Thus the word 'amour', prominent in the song's title but not verbally present in the poetic text that is sung, is embodied (and even ubiquitous) in the music. The musical language confirms the composer's trust that, while the union of the two lovers suggested in Penrose's canvas may seem unattainable, they themselves are reliably supported by God's love.

Conclusion

As I have attempted to show, many of the triangles that are habitually constructed in the field of the arts have at least one angle that may make the necessity of closure and geometric logic seem 'impossible'. This is true not only for the notorious 'artistic triangle' supposedly linking the three participants involved in the life of an artwork – creator, mediator and beholder, but it is also true in the case of triangles defining each of these participants individually. The example I fashioned with the Hindu Trinity as a metonymic trio shows this with regard to three essentially different creative aims; my case study from Tavener's opera documents three conditions in which the limits of human sense perception displace the beholders' appreciation from the conscious to the subconscious realm; my example from Messiaen's art song demonstrates at once the extraordinary richness of an artistic mediator's input and the highly individual reading of the first work of art he or she may incite in the final appreciators by presenting it through the lens of his or her own, secondary medium.

Were one to attempt to come full circle, from the piece of music interpreting a poem that in turn responds to a painting and now back to Penrose's (and Reutersvård's) 'impossible triangle', one could observe that the repeated mediation does indeed lead to an interestingly twisted appearance of the three-dimensional object: returning to the point of departure after having travelled through the three hinged legs, one notices with wonder that none of the surfaces is where it was before. Mediation – in the various meanings of this term – is a creative act that changes its object's appearance and message.

Notes

1. Sir Roger Penrose, OM, FRS (born 8 August 1931) is an English mathematical physicist and Emeritus Rouse Ball Professor of Mathematics at the Mathematical Institute, University of Oxford. Sir Roland Penrose (1900–1984) was an English artist, historian and poet. He was a major promoter and collector of modern art, and was a friend of the Surrealists in the United Kingdom and a friend of Picasso.


4. *John Tavener in conversation with Michael Stewart on Mary of Egypt*, recorded interview added as track 20 to the Collins Classics recording of *Mary of Egypt*.


6. Peter Sparling, professor of dance at the University of Michigan School of Music and choreographer of the Peter Sparling Dance Company, in a private conversation with the author, fall 2003.


8. The original was long believed to have been lost during World War II. However, in a recent book by Penrose's son, it is listed as 'held in a private collection': A. Penrose (2001) *Roland Penrose: The Friendly Surrealist. A Memoir* (Munich: Prestel), p. 48.


10. Cf. both ‘les oiseaux du silence’, mentioned in the commentary for the *Regard du Fils sur le Fils* (no. V), and *Regard du silence* (no. XVII).
Beyond Definition: A Pragmatic Approach to Intermediality

Valerie Robillard

Theories [are] instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest. We don’t lie back upon them, we move forward, and, on occasion, make nature over again by their aid. Pragmatism unstiffens all our theories, limbers them up and sets each one at work.

—William James

As media continue to merge in new and interesting ways, the various theories and definitions formulated to describe and articulate the nature and complexity of their interactions have generated compelling, and often conflicting, critical discourses. Indeed, the current plethora of perspectives on ‘intermediality’ not only demonstrates the slipperiness of the term but also suggests that there may be more than one theoretical inroad by which to fully understand the multiplicity of intermedial operations. Current research into intermediality, with some notable exceptions,\(^2\) has primarily focused on defining the terms of the field; however, it is becoming increasingly clear that definitions, although essential in laying out common terms of discourse, do not fully contribute to our understanding, or articulation, of the various types and degrees of medial interaction.

The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate the need to employ ontological systems to delineate medial types, systems that have proven indispensable to other disciplines (such as the natural sciences and linguistics) in determining the relative positions of concepts and categories with respect to one another. Although the notion of ‘exact disciplines’ can be debated, the sciences have proven to be more easily ordered into categories than have the arts, as the latter are closely tied to fluctuating cultural and aesthetic codes.

This essay will explore the advantages of applying a system of categories to intermedial inquiry by focussing on the intertextual exchange between verbal and visual texts within the hybrid artwork. The advantage of exploring intermediality (partly) in terms of intertextuality lies in the fact that the interaction between the visual and verbal arts can be considered in terms of their interreferentiality and semiotic encoding. As Peter Wagner has
suggested, the discourse on intermediality needs a reunification of writing and painting under ‘the common banner of representation’ and an:

intermedial exploration of the working of both linguistic and pictorial signs in one medium. Intertextuality in art thus becomes a possibility in research . . . in a more extensive variety of ekphrasis, broadly understood, which considers visual art as a space serving as both meeting ground and battle ground for encoded, rhetorical, sign systems that refer to texts and images.³

Wagner’s argument for subsuming verbal and visual operations under the heading of ‘intertextuality’ offers intriguing possibilities for the categorization of distinct intermedial types. Heinrich Plett, for example, has suggested that intermediality be considered a sub-category of intertextuality, as ‘it is not usually single signifiers which are exchanged for others but themes, motifs, scenes or even moods of a pretext which take shape in a different medium.’⁴ Both Wagner and Plett make a good case for considering intertextuality within the intermedial paradigm (although the hierarchy implied by Plett will be questioned later in this essay).

To address the operation of intertextuality within an intermedial framework, I will explore one small theoretical corner of the intermedial debate, that of ‘ekphrasis’ and ‘illustration’, both of which, as I have argued elsewhere,³ can be analysed in terms of their intertextuality. I hope to demonstrate that such complex combinations require a broad epistemological basis and ontological system by which to explore and articulate the variety and types of their interaction.

Categorizing intermedial operations

Why employ categories in aesthetic discourse since, by their very nature, categories are imperfect representations of phenomena? Can the demand that categories be ‘mutually exclusive’ (the ‘bottom line’ for scientific models) be useful (or even possible) for studies in the humanities whose objects are often far more ‘subjective’ than the empirical sciences? In other words, categories, because of their perceived rigidity, may seem inappropriate for organizing concepts that are generated by cultural or aesthetic codes. On the other hand, categories, unless they are mutually exclusive, will not accurately represent difference.⁵

In spite of the obvious pitfalls associated with classifying intermedial types, the formulation of a system of categories which takes into account the ‘slippage’ associated with cultural or aesthetic encoding might successfully contribute to understanding the operations and interrelations of media through isolating and categorizing their various domains and characteristics. The typology presented here, which I have called ‘The Differential Model’, is
divided into categories and sub-categories and focuses on types and degrees of intertextual relationships. This model, originally designed for the purpose of delineating and differentiating logo-centric ekphrastic operations, has been altered to accommodate intertextual operations on both sides of the relationship (verbal-visual, visual-verbal).

Differential model

This section will present a conceptual framework devised to differentiate types of medial interactions, most specifically between the verbal and visual arts. As, similar to verbal ekphrasis, the majority of ‘illustrated’ texts enlarge, reduce or in some way alter their pretexts – and for similar reasons – these operations can also be traced within a categorical framework. The typology in Figure 9 is designed to be (a) non-hierarchical and (b) one whose categories serve as vehicles for making generalizations about an artwork’s representative, referential and interactive capacity.

This model differentiates between explicitly-marked visual or verbal texts and those which signal a more subtle, associative relationship with their pre-texts. Each heading is divided into subheadings. The first category in the typology, labelled as ‘Referentiality’, reflects the assumption that ekphrastic texts, because they are specific to particular works of art, will, in the rhetorical spirit of ekphrasis, mark their pre-texts to some degree. In a poem, for example, the name of the artwork or artist might be explicitly mentioned in the title or elsewhere in the text. Similarly, in a visual work of art the verbal pre-text might be mentioned in a label next to the painting or attached to the frame, or, as in some modernist texts, appear within the painting itself.

![Figure 9 The differential model](image-url)
The second sub-category, ‘allusion’, subsumes more subtle references in which the pre-text is called to mind through the presence of some (generally) familiar aspect present in the target text. Finally, the sub-category ‘indeterminate marking’ accounts for the presence of some reference that would not be generally understood as connected to a pre-text, but would be accessible to a viewer (or ‘ideal reader’) who has subject-specific knowledge or a particular ‘cultural memory’. The second category, labelled ‘Re-presentation’, differentiates between the ways in which the textual details of the verbal or visual pre-text are present in the target text. The sub-category, ‘selectivity’, refers to the detail from the pre-text that is transferred to the target text; the second sub-category, ‘structurality’, refers to the manner in which a text follows the physical organization of its pre-text. (In the visual arts, for example, this is often encountered in the triptych, where the narrative structure of the original story is followed in a linear fashion; in the verbal arts, a poet might organize the objects of the poem around the structural conventions of, say, a cubist painting.) Finally, the ‘Associative’ category accounts for those texts concerned with conventions or ideas associated with the visual or verbal pre-text (mythos/topos) or are ‘dialogical’ in that they deliberately establish a tension (both semantic and ideological) between the original text and the new, wherein the former is cast in a new, opposing framework. (A filmic example of ‘ reframing’ would be Peter Greenaway’s Prospero’s Books, based on Shakespeare’s play The Tempest.) This final category is linked to the referential properties of the text (Category I), as reception of these intertextual elements will depend on level of ‘readership’. The following section will explore the possibilities of such a typology by considering the complexities of the Scottish artist Calum Colvin’s Fragments of Ancient Poetry (2002), focussing on the manner in which both verbal and visual texts interact to convey meaning.

The intermedial artwork

Colvin’s Fragments of Ancient Poetry, a series of photographs based on James MacPherson’s 1760 text of the same title, is unique in its movement toward a complete intermedial performance, as it is situated, according to Colvin, ‘on the boundaries of Painting, Photography, Sculpture and Electronic Imaging’. Through his employment of a wide variety of media, Colvin establishes a multi-levelled relationship with the original text. Before analysing Colvin’s work as an intermedial ‘event’, however, I would first like to address the aesthetic conventions that it challenges – namely those connected with ‘illustration’.

Most definitions of illustration suggest that the translation of the verbal to the visual necessitates some level of exemplification of the pre-text in which the visual becomes an emblem for the verbal. Yet nearly all (art) historical periods have produced a wide variety of visual approaches to verbal texts
that far exceed simple transcriptions. Meyer Schapiro has suggested a variety of ways in which illustrations engage their visual pre-texts, ranging from those that ‘enlarge’ the verbal text, adding details, figures, settings and so on, that are not present in the original, to those which are extreme reductions of the text in which only a few details are represented. These artistic choices are often the function of cultural, social and/or aesthetic concerns of a particular time and place, or reflect individual artistic style or ideology.\textsuperscript{15}

I would like to postulate that, as these operations apply equally to verbal and visual ‘texts’, both can be subsumed under the heading of ‘ekphrasis’ (in a departure from the logo-centric origin of the term). Proceeding from this understanding of the term, the textually-based aspects of Colvin’s Ossian series, therefore, can be classified as a type of ‘visual ekphrasis’ which belongs to the overarching notion of ‘intertextuality’. As will become clear, however, this intertextual aspect accounts for only a small part of the intermediary and multimedial nature of Colvin’s Fragments, which are, as Tom Normand points out, ‘created as constructed sets, painted with iconic subjects, decorated with symbolic references, and, finally, photographed. The photographic images are subsequently digitized and presented on canvas. Sculpture, environment, collage, painting, photography, and computer-art combine in a paradoxical and fantastic vision.’\textsuperscript{14} What are the implications of attempting to categorize both textual and extra-textual media in works such as Colvin’s?

Colvin’s Fragments depicts the discrepancies between a culture’s perception of its past and modern realities through exploring the epic nature of MacPherson’s Fragments of Ancient Poetry, supposedly the poet Ossian’s account of the heroic deeds of Fingal, a third-century Scottish king. In spite of ongoing scepticism concerning authorship, this literary work not only had an important impact on Romantic sensibility, but has become an integral part of Scottish identity. These epics, which ‘conjured a world of heroic northern warriors whose savagery was tempered by distinguished codes of honour, sentiment, and a recognizable morality’,\textsuperscript{15} form the basis of Colvin’s intermedial artwork. In a series of eight photographs, Colvin addresses the relevance of these epic conventions to contemporary Scottish identity by juxtaposing these with objects from Scottish popular culture and more recent literary past. The importance of Colvin’s artwork to intermedial studies in general (and ‘visual ekphrasis’ in particular) is significant, as it far exceeds simple exemplification of its pre-text and the variants of illustration suggested by Schapiro. According to Iain Gale, Colvin ‘wants to peel away the layers of historical image-making which obscure Scottish culture’ and with works such as Fragments, ‘he is reflecting on how Scotland has become a nation of stereotypes’.\textsuperscript{16} Colvin achieves this dialogical effect not only by juxtaposing fragments of popular culture with subtle references to the Ossianic tradition, but also by making use of wider references to cultural
archetypes and literary texts associated thematically with the issues raised by the original: Macpherson’s *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*.

In *Fragments*, Colvin arranges several objects against a stone backdrop, objects that serve as literary references (primarily to MacPherson, Walter Scott and Robert Burns) or perform a metaphorical function (see Figure 10). Colvin begins the series with a Maori head projected onto a movie screen, an image suggesting the sense of a Celtic past. Over a sequence of eight photographs, Colvin transforms this central image into a cultural cliché: a tipsy Scotsman sporting a ‘Jimmy hat’. Eventually, this image too disappears, ‘crumbling into dust, becoming the stuff of legend’. Further, these photographs contain oblique references to the epic tradition embodied by the Ossian texts through the incorporation of fragments of Colvin’s portraits of Robert Burns and Walter Scott: an eye borrowed from Burns and an ear from Scott, ironically placing the heroic epic against the romanticized

![Image](image-url)
Highland adventures of Scott and the lyrics of Burns. Also included in this stone landscape are modern icons that establish a similar ironic connection between the past and present, between ancient and popular culture: a slide projector showing images from the film *Brigadoon*, a record player (with the drunken Scot on the turntable – later to develop into the central image) – and a souvenir Celtic lollipop. These are just three objects among the many that Colvin adds to this ruined landscape, but they are sufficient for our discussion here: the intermedial tension achieved by placing literary and cultural icons (both past and present) within a shared visual space.

**Intertextual components of Fragments**

To what extent is Colvin’s *Fragments* ‘intertextual’? More importantly, what aspects of this work cannot be contained in such a text-based framework? I will explore these questions by turning to the ‘Differential Model’. The first question that we will want to ask is this: in what way is Colvin’s artwork ‘referential’? In other words, does it clearly indicate that it is based on Macpherson’s *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*? Because the pre-text is identified in the title of Colvin’s work, referentiality is high. We also find several literary allusions and some intriguing indeterminate marking that are indexical of the original text. Furthermore, the inclusion of the (partial) images of Burns and Scott place the work within more than one literary context, and these visual allusions fall under the sub-category of ‘dialogicity’, which will be discussed below.

Moving to the ‘Re-presentative’ category, it is clear that few details of the original text have been selected. However, what at first glance appears to be a series of still-life images turns out to contain a narrative progression achieved by a rearrangement of objects and the transformation of one image into another. Although the artwork does not follow Ossian’s narrative line, it nevertheless literally performs the larger issue of cultural change: the ‘measured disintegration’ of a people that governs Macpherson’s text and both artworks in Colvin’s series (*Blind Ossian* and *Fragments*). This brings us to the final, ‘Associative’, category.

If Colvin’s *Fragments* does not explicitly engage its pre-text, either through reference or re-presentation, it does, nevertheless, have a highly symbolic and metaphorical relationship to its pre-text and this relationship is ‘associative’ through its play on cultural memory and associated myths. Furthermore, we can claim that dialogicity in this work is high since the issue of Scottish identity lies at the heart of the artwork’s conception and, most importantly, its construction. Recalling that dialogicity refers to the way in which a verbal or visual text ‘reframes’ its pre-text or places it in another context, the use of Macpherson’s text is dialogical in that it raises the issue of the demise of mythic stature in the modern world. Aside from its dialogical stance, Colvin’s *Fragments* is concerned with the ‘mythos/topos’
that generated Macpherson’s text and its cultural and literary aftermath primarily by stressing the absence of ancient warriors and a noble race. The placement of the head of Walter Scott in this construction is associative in the sense that, influenced by the romanticism of the Ossian fragments, Scott popularized Highland history through his novels, yet was also regarded as responsible for its trivialization and for generating much Scottish ‘kitsch’ (tartan kilts, Jimmy hats and so on), criticized as ‘the fatal legacy of Scott’s achievement’.

The inclusion of the film Brigadoon (more romantic kitsch) in all eight plates serves to underline the overall theme of a lost or misunderstood national identity. Finally, the work is replete with semiotic codes for the modern world: for example, the ‘Celtic’ lollipop wrapper, the drunken Scot and the Jimmy hat, become the ‘potent symbol of Scotland’s self-denigrating identity crisis’. In view of the fact that Colvin uses Macpherson’s text as a template upon which to explore questions concerning cultural heritage and its deconstruction, we can arguably conclude that the intertextual relationship of Colvin’s visual text to its verbal pre-text is primarily ‘associative’ (more specifically, dialogical) and not in any way depictive – ultimately rendering an artwork that is a far cry from the conventional notion of ‘illustration’.

Intertextuality? Intermediality? Multimediality?

The complexity of Colvin’s Fragments raises interesting questions concerning the ways in which we define intermediality and categorize its operations. If, following Plett, we understand intermediality to function as a variant of intertextuality, then we will be concerned with textual semiotics and with the manner in which the diverse elements of a pre-text are incorporated into the new text (in this case, the artwork). In applying the ‘Differential Model’ to Colvin’s Fragments, however, we find that there is much present in this complex work that cannot be accounted for within an intertextual framework. Although the iconic (and ‘found’) objects that have been added to Colvin’s artwork are not related to Macpherson’s Fragments of Ancient Poetry but to contemporary popular culture, these additions can be categorized as ‘dialogical’, as the placement of ‘life media’ in juxtaposition with other (oblique) references to Macpherson’s text render a kind of spatiotemporal contextual ekphrasis, as defined by Hans Lund. According to Lund, time-contextual ekphrasis is generated by references to other artworks or texts which arouse a reader’s associations or ‘memories’ and it is the reader ‘who links the verbalized image to the memory of other images’.

Spatiocontextual images are linked to each other through ‘the physical space in which they are contemplated’. In the case of Colvin’s Fragments, the placement of various objects within the shared visual space evoke several levels of reading on the part of the viewer and the resulting dialogical effect is crucial to Colvin’s overall theme of cultural loss.
However, what the above analysis has demonstrated is that there is no vehicle within an intertextual system of categories to account for the \textit{materiality} of Colvin’s artwork nor is there a way to categorize the process of composition, which involves the interaction of a number of media. As we know, Colvin’s work is based on a complex process: an image first constructed in three-dimensional space is painted, photographed and finally destroyed. All that remains are the photographs: ‘layers and traces that must be uncovered by the reader’.\textsuperscript{24} Colvin also produces meaning in his entire \textit{Ossian} series by the use of computer imaging. It has been argued that Colvin’s employment of the computer for the series addresses an important and controversial aspect of the original text: that Colvin was ‘inspired to resurrect Macpherson’s texts by the dubious authenticity of the Ossian myths and their similarity to the deceptions possible with modern digital photography, which also distort and subtly change images of reality’.\textsuperscript{25} Colvin’s work, therefore, not only takes a dialogical stance towards Macpherson’s original text but also takes issue with the very process of its making.

Colvin’s \textit{Fragments} become even more interesting, for this study, when placed against major theories of intertextuality, namely those of Michael Riffaterre, whose reader-oriented theories focus on the hypogram. As Colvin points out, his use of the fixed viewpoint of the camera is designed:

\begin{quote}
 to collect the manipulated and constructed image in order to create elaborate narratives. These narratives have the quality of being both open and closed. They are closed in that they clearly refer to given icons and archetypes of Western culture, but open in that they accommodate any number of potential readings. These readings, in turn, reflect the contemporary cultural climate and the unique authorial role of the viewer.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

This notion of the ‘closed’ and ‘open’ narrative recalls Riffaterre’s differentiation between \textit{obligatory intertextuality}, which demands that the reader take account of some ‘hypogrammatic origin’, and \textit{aleatory intertextuality}, which allows the reader to read a text through the prism of all and any familiar texts.\textsuperscript{27} Furthermore, Riffaterre has posited three kinds of ‘semantic indirection’ by which the reader/viewer is led to consider the hypograms that lie behind the target text. These are: (1) displacement, where the sign shifts meaning, as in metaphor and metonymy; (2) distortion, which functions through ambiguity, contradiction or nonsense; and (3) creation, in which textual space serves as a principle of organization for making signs out of linguistic (and semiotic) items that may not be meaningful otherwise.\textsuperscript{28} Colvin’s series clearly makes use of all forms of ‘semantic indirection’, as set forth by Riffaterre, and in so doing has achieved the creative manipulation of visual space necessary to form a symbolic link between past and present, text and ‘life media’, and visual and verbal texts. As these links depend on
the translation of one text to another, we can conclude that there is much
in the series that is intertextual. However, there is more than one opera-
tion at work that cannot be contained (or explained) within an intertextual
framework. The materials and media employed are not ‘texts’ and therefore
are not referential; furthermore, in a work such as Colvin’s where media are
used and then erased to produce the final artwork, the work bears traces of
process which need to be accounted for. Here is where the slipperiness of ter-
minality and categories comes into play. As it is clear that overall meaning
in Colvin’s *Fragments* depends on both textual and medial interaction, the
question arises as to how one system of categories or set of definitions can
contain the interactive potential of such hybrid works.

**Categories and medial difference**

We must be systematic, but we must keep our systems open.
—Alfred North Whitehead

Categories delineating medial types are, almost by definition, bound to be
somewhat inaccurate in their attempt to contain various genres as well as
to keep pace with the ever-developing and innovative ‘cross-over’ experi-
ments of contemporary artists and writers. As Dick Higgins suggests, ‘much
of the best work being produced today seems to fall between media’. This
essay has argued in favour of the categorization of one aspect of interme-
diality: the (inter)textual aspects of hybrid artworks. Yet even the notion of
‘text’ is problematic, as our agreement as to what constitutes a ‘text’ remains
elusive. According to Winfred Nöth (quoting Petőfi), ‘since textuality “is not
an inherent property of certain objects, but is rather a property assigned
to objects by those producing or analysing them,” it is not surprising that
semioticians of the text have been unable to agree on a definition and on
criteria of their object of research’. However, as Nöth goes onto explain, ‘In
the pragmatic view, the text is defined by criteria of communication … the
pragmatic criteria determine the text within its situational context. This con-
text comprises textual and extra-textual phenomenon’. Taken strictly, the
notion of ‘text’ may apply only to written texts or, taken more widely, to the
visual arts, or it may be extended to all types of communicative processes
such as film, performance (and gesture), iconic objects and so on. It is this
wider sense of the word that gives us the freedom to explore the intertextual
(and therefore encoded) nature of the composite artwork and to differenti-
tiate this type of medium from those which are ‘extratextual phenomena’.
In other words, we are in a position to distinguish the ‘message’ from the
‘material’. Of course, this differentiation has raised serious questions of its
own. If we can find ways to categorize intertextual operations within the
intermedial framework, how do we account for the ‘material’ (extratextual)
aspects of these composite artworks? For example, the depiction of a camera
and film screen within Colvin’s *Fragments* bears an encoded message relevant to its context and therefore is intertextual; the use, however, of a camera to construct this work is purely material and calls for different categories altogether, those that take process into account. For example, I have referred throughout this essay to Colvin’s *Fragments* as ‘photographs’, yet photography is only one medium used for the total artwork. How do we account for other medial traces within a categorical framework? This brings us back to the problem of categories in general.

Returning to Plett’s suggestion that intermediality be considered a sub-category of intertextuality, the whole issue of ‘genus, species, class’ is raised in which we are again confronted with definition and nomenclature. Plett here addresses an important question of hierarchy: which is the largest, most inclusive category and which the sub-category? In other words, if intermediality is the overarching term, where does intertextuality, clearly a crucial element in intermedial discourse, come into play? Perhaps a way forward might be to reverse Plett’s hierarchy so that ‘Intermediality’ becomes the overarching concept, with one of its major categories labelled ‘Intertextuality’, which will account for those aspects of the composite artwork that are communicative and encoded; a sub-category of Intertextuality, then, might be labelled as ‘ekphrasis’, to be shared with sub-categories that account for other types of intertextual exchange (verbal–verbal or visual–visual transference for example). In this vein, a second category under Intermediality might then be classified as ‘multimedial’ (a term explored by Jürgen Müller in this volume and elsewhere). This category would include the materials employed (film, paint, computer technology and so on). The manner in which these could be placed into sub-categories might be drawn from cognitive categories such as those formulated by Lars Elleström (in this volume), which differentiate between types of sensory impact generated by the medial ‘event’. It is perhaps this type of category which could account for the layers (and traces) of media used by Colvin to create the final artwork, as these elements are not encoded messages but pure materials and therefore sensory. Once we have been able to place the various medial types within a categorical framework, we might then be in a position to address more general questions, such as those raised by Werner Wolf on determining ‘medial dominance’.32

It is clear that what categories offer us is the mechanism by which to schematically represent intertextual varieties and medial oppositions. Simply stated, the sciences (including linguistics) have taught us the usefulness of models in organizing experience and knowledge. Whether or not categories can be as accurately employed in literary discourse as they are in other disciplines, they do, nevertheless, bring us one step closer to a shared language and ontological system by which to advance our discourse on intermedial topics. According to Nelson Goodman, understanding the world of art is very much like understanding the world of science, as it always requires
interpretation of symbols and their relations among themselves. Developing a shared system of categories, which would have the advantage of delineating subtype/super-types and articulating part-whole relationships, is as relevant in determining the positions of the aesthetic concepts with respect to one another as it is in categorizing genus and species within the more ‘exact’ disciplines. Recalling William James’s statement on pragmatism which began this essay, devising pragmatic categories need not set artificial parameters around our topic nor limit its extension to other potential developments within intermedial discourse. The real challenge, as I see it, is to find useful frameworks by which to articulate fundamental differences among the media before we can begin to explore the nature and extent of their interaction.

Notes

2. See, for example, essays by Lars Elleström, Jørgen Bruhn and Jürgen Müller in this volume.
6. This problem has been addressed by Elinor Rosch, who has suggested in her prototype theory that some disciplines need to employ ‘fuzzy categories’ to describe relations between concepts. See G. Lakoff (1987) Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press), p. 15.
8. The terms ‘selectivity’ and ‘dialogicity’ have been adapted from Manfred Pfister’s Intertextual Scales set out in his article, ‘Konzepte der Intertextualität’ in U. Broich and M. Pfister (eds) (1985) Intertextualität: Formen, Funktionen, angelsächsische Fallstudien (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer).
9. Ibid.
10. This is where the idea of ‘mutual-exclusivity’ of a textually-based model breaks down. A future restructuring of such a model would need to provide several branches that account for the indeterminacy of reception.
11. One of Scotland’s leading contemporary artists, Calum Colvin is Professor of Fine Arts at the University of Dundee. His works have been exhibited in venues such as the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Museum
of Fine Art in Houston, Texas, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh, which exhibited Colvin’s Ossian series, as well as the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow (The Mad Hatters’ Review, http://www.madhattersreview.com/issue7/contributors7.shtml, date accessed 13 August 2009). The Ossian series includes Blind Ossian and Fragments of Ancient Poetry. I would like to express my appreciation to Calum Colvin for generously granting permission to use his images as the basis for this essay.


15. Ibid.


17. It has been suggested that the head might be seen as an ‘ironic leitmotif representing the fallibility of history and the problem, even the absurdity, of those narratives that search for essences, particularly racial essences’: Normand (2002) Calum Colvin, p. 22.


20. Ibid., p. 44.


23. Ibid., p. 177.


'Imagine Media!' This motto gives reason to reflect upon the concept of mediality, the problem of medial boundaries and possible spaces for intermedial exchange and cross-fertilization.¹ The word ‘imagine’, however, also points to the permeability and constructedness of allegedly established media boundaries, calling into question the validity of such commonly accepted notions as, for instance, ‘literature’, ‘music’ or ‘art’. Apart from drawing attention to the artificiality and arbitrary nature of media definition and classification, this slogan also contains an inherent notion of intermediality, of a reciprocal relationship between different media, as we conventionally understand them. The question of what a certain medium is always depends on the conception, the ‘imagination’ of the beholder – be it the recipient or the medium itself. For not only do we as scholars, performing artists or audience have a specific understanding of what we recognize to be a certain medium, but also the medium itself intrinsically incorporates and conveys its ‘image’, its version of mediality, either by self-referentially and self-reflexively pointing to its own medial status, by referring to other media and thus determining its own medial boundaries, or simply by displaying performative features of its own mediality in dissociation from other media. In the case of intermedial ‘imagination’, a medium defines itself by its own potentials, but also with regard to its limitations. Especially when turning to another medium, it automatically embarks on a dialogical contemplation about possible borrowings, impulses and insights which could contribute to enhancing its own (limited) expressive power.

With the Modernist movement, self-reflexive and experimental tendencies increasingly occurred in all media. Ezra Pound’s appeal to ‘MAKE IT NEW’² is paradigmatic for the general Modernist quest for revolutionizing the arts by leaving trodden paths, dispensing with outdated aesthetic models and venturing into new expressive fields. One of the crucial elements in the
process of the revolution of the arts at the turn of the twentieth century was the questioning and expansion of established media boundaries. More than ever before media turned to other media, assimilating media-external techniques and qualities into their own medial realm. In fact, Modernist artists were particularly drawn to the musical medium. Walter Pater’s famous assertion that ‘all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music’ reflects a common tendency among Modernist writers, but also painters, to turn to music as an aesthetic model.4

In this essay I will discuss a very specific case of intermedial ‘imagination’ on the basis of a musico-literary experiment of American Modernist poet Amy Lowell. I will show how Lowell’s poem ‘Stravinsky’s Three Pieces “Grotesques”, for String Quartet’ takes up a particular piece of music and verbalizes it within the poetic medium.5 By ‘imagining’ its own mediated version of another medium, the poem engages in what I call ‘intermedial translation’ and thus creates not only a concept of the medium music, but at the same time also self-reflexively redefines, or ‘imagines’ its own medial condition.

As Jane Ambrose reveals in ‘Amy Lowell and the Music of her Poetry’,6 Amy Lowell held a lifelong interest in music as poetry’s ‘sister art’. Several of Lowell’s poems either allude to music or display musical analogies on a structural level. In 1915, Lowell heard Igor Stravinsky’s ‘Three Pieces “Grotesques”, for String Quartet’ performed in concert in Boston, which inspired her to convert an entire work of art from one medium into another, thus performing an act of intermedial translation. This transformative process falls under the category of what Lars Elleström calls ‘mediation and transformation of media’,8 but has also been described by terms such as ‘intermedial transposition’,9 ‘Medienwechsel’,10 adaptation, transposition d’art and so on.11 This example of intermedial translation corresponds to the notion of ekphrasis, as it is a ‘verbal representation of a real…text composed in a non-verbal sign system’.12 However, in this context I would like to use the term intermedial ‘translation’, for it emphasizes the tension between the notion of accuracy on the one hand and creative originality on the other hand. Furthermore, the idea of ‘translation’ implies a perspective that is not restricted to the semiotic level, in terms of a simple shift between different sign systems. As with any translation process, intermedial translation also has considerable cultural and aesthetic implications resulting from the interaction of two culturally and historically embedded artefacts.13 As I will show, Amy Lowell not only transgresses medial boundaries by referring to and engaging with another medium. She also raises our awareness with regard to the very translatability and exchangeability between different media by highlighting at once transmedial relations as well as media-specific distinctions and divergences. The concept of intermedial translation will thus also
serve to reflect upon general processes of transfer and appropriation between the two media: music and poetry.

Processes of translation undeniably played an important role in Modernist literary production. Modernist writers not only produced a great number of translations, they also frequently drew on foreign, often classical, writings which were integrated into their own texts, either as translations or in their original form. The practice of translation did not solely serve hermeneutic purposes, but instead participated in the Modernists’ experimental urge to employ alternative materials in a general rewriting process. In Modernism, translation was no longer regarded as a purely functional and inferior form of writing, but rather attained the ‘status [of] a primary mode of Modernist literary production in its own right’. Along the lines of T. S. Eliot’s notion of tradition and originality, translation functioned ‘as a kind of dynamic procedural lens through which the Modernists could at once view both the past as well as other cultures and . . . focus their images of these traditions in their own times’. Obviously, translation became an integral part of Modernist literary practice, in that it transformed already existing texts, which Eliot calls ‘tradition’, into ‘the new’. Translation thus grew to be an integral part of the original and creative writing process, while the boundaries between original and translated text became increasingly blurred.

Modernist writers held the strong view that only through an active engagement with the ‘other’ texts and media could the ‘self’ be comprehended and developed. In his famous essay ‘The Task of the Translator’, Walter Benjamin describes the aim of a good translation to ‘express the central reciprocal relationship between languages’. In highlighting the reciprocity of the translation process and the repercussions which the translation has on the original text by giving it an ‘afterlife’, Benjamin’s considerations provide a valuable basis for the question of intermedial translation processes. Although translation studies have conventionally been concerned with written texts only, the concept of translation could as well prove suitable for the context of intermedial relationships. If translation is regarded as a transformation of a pretext of a particular system into another text or system, certain intermedial processes could be considered as just another form of ‘translating’ from one medium to another.

For a long time, ‘translation’ in the literary or linguistic context has commonly only been associated with the transfer of a text from one language to another. According to the definition in the Oxford English Dictionary, there is, however, already an indication of the notion of ‘intermedial translation’ in the nineteenth century, when ‘translation’ is referred to as ‘the expression or rendering of something in another medium or form, e.g. of a painting by an engraving or etching’. This early use of the concept of intermedial translation has been taken up by Roman Jakobson in his essay ‘On
Linguistic Aspects of Translation, which differentiates between three types of translation; ‘intralingual’, ‘interlingual’ and ‘intersemiotic’ translation. While only the second type corresponds to the commonly accepted notion of translation between different languages, the third concept, ‘intersemiotic translation’, implies the translation between different semiotic systems, for example, between written texts and film or music. Even though Jakobson’s ‘intersemiotic translation’ is somehow restricted in that the source medium is always a written text, we owe it to him that the concept of translation is extended from its strictly linguistic to a broader semiotic context, including transformations and intersections not only between different languages but, more generally, between any different sign systems.

Recent translation studies have increasingly followed this expanded and often metaphorical understanding of translation, disassociating it from its strictly linguistic meaning and instead concentrating more on the universally and cross-disciplinarily applicable transformational processes involved. As maintained by Mieke Bal and Joanne Morra, ‘today translation is gaining ground as a crucial trope, idea, concept, metaphor and mode of interpretation’. In accord with Shirley Chew and Alistair Stead, who understand translation ‘in its transferred or metaphorical senses, most fundamentally as a process of change or a passage from one state to another’, I would like to place the idea of translation, ‘translate’ it, into the context of intermediality. Intermedial translation, as I understand it, can thus be regarded as a generic term for various different expressions which have been applied to describe the processes of change from one (medial) state to another, to use Chew and Stead’s turn of phrase, such as ‘transposition’, ‘transcription’ and ‘adaptation’. Whether the aim of intermedial translation is to make the original medium ‘readable’ or to try experimentally to make a text fitting for another medial context is a matter that is still open to debate, as is the question of the degree to which the transformation process also implies modification and alteration, and to what extent intermedial translation is either total or partial.

The fact that a translation, as an original artwork in itself, is always a modified ‘version’ of the original, containing features quite distinct and divergent from the reference medium, applies, of course, all the more to the case of intermedial translation. Even if the target medium employs trans or intermedial components which let it appear like the original medium, there is always a certain degree of modification and change. Not the medium itself, but an ‘imagined’ version of the medium, realized by means of another medium, is the outcome of the intermedial translation process.

In order to elucidate further the concept of intermedial translation, I will illustrate my theoretical considerations by means of a musico-poetic transcription by Amy Lowell. The musical pieces she refers to, Igor Stravinsky’s Three Pieces for String Quartet, were written in 1914 and were originally titled...
‘Dance’, ‘Excentrique’ and ‘Cantique’. The pieces were supplemented by a short introduction written by the composer himself, which was read out before the performance and which most likely formed the basis of Lowell’s poem. The introduction described the setting of the pieces as a peasant dance, a grotesque Pierrot scene and a tragic funeral service. Although an approximate narrative thread is discernible throughout the three pieces, they can well be regarded individually. In this context, I will mainly restrict my analysis to the first of the three pieces.

If we take a closer look at the different translation processes involved in this musico-poetic experiment, it is especially striking how accurately the poem takes up the music and represents it by both ‘explicit’ and ‘implicit’ intermedial references. Lowell both imitates the music with regard to its compositional material and describes her sound impressions by adding a semantic sphere to the music. The vivid sound imitations, descriptions and thematic associations are all the more remarkable, since Lowell must have been able to listen to the music just once. In her poetic transcription of Stravinsky’s music, Lowell retains the overall title of the pieces, as well as its three-part structure, although she interprets the three autonomous pieces as movements of a larger whole by grouping them together. The first of Stravinsky’s Three Pieces, originally entitled ‘Dance’, calls to mind a folkloristic peasant dance, first and foremost evoked by the seemingly ‘simple’ melody with its relatively small pitch range and its repetitive and cyclical structure. The first part of Lowell’s poem takes up this thematic setting of a peasant dance in a ‘market-place’ (line 11) with ‘sabots slapping the worn, old stones’ (line 12), articulating a potential program of the music on the basis of very accurate aural impressions.

The kinetic nature of the piece is supported by its rhythmic layout which is characterized by the recurrence of extremely regular ostinati which are, however, set against each other and thus create rhythmical displacement and instability. Lowell’s poem captures this sense of rhythmic disruption, which is clearly perceivable in the music, by bringing up the image of bulky sabots dancing on cobblestones: ‘Clumsy and hard they are, / And uneven, / Losing half a beat’ (lines 15–17). Written in free verse, the poem is liberated from regular meter, so that particular rhythmic elements of the music can be imitated. The basic rhythmical unit of the music, the alternation of a single quarter and double eighth note, is reflected in the repeated words ‘sharp (and) cutting, sharp (and) cutting’ or, more vividly, in the onomatopoetic ‘Bump! Bump! Tong-ti-bump!’ (line 7), and ‘shuffle, rap’ (line 23).

While Lowell’s poem clearly suggests a peasant dance scene, Stravinsky’s piece, with its lack of clear structure and melodic circularity, seems almost constructed. Rainer Sievers is right in observing a certain mechanical quality about the piece. Like a perpetual motion machine, the melody could continue endlessly, repeating the patterns over and over, until it suddenly comes to a halt in a rather abrupt manner. Obviously, the artistic
alienation of a traditional folk dance is as evident as its imitation. Stravinsky does not attempt to reproduce authentic folk music, but by combining it with new compositional techniques, he treats it in an experimental way in order to create a new, idiosyncratic means of expression in line with his Modernist aesthetics. By employing folk elements, but at the same time dissociating himself from these influences, Stravinsky performs a typical Modernist move. Furthermore, through his alienation of the traditional material towards a mechanical and machine-like gestus, he establishes a link between artistic modernism and the notion of ‘modernization’ in terms of technological and industrial progress.

Stravinsky’s experimentalism also shows in his unconventional treatment of tonal colour. The traditional chamber music formation of a string quartet is transformed into a folk band, in which the typically delicate string instruments produce harsh and vulgar sounds. The almost excruciating crudeness of the sounds are described by Lowell as ‘sharp and cutting’ (line 4), probably particularly referring to the dissonant minor ninth played in the opening by the viola, portrayed as a ‘screching thread’ (line 3) which is so discordant that ‘it hurts’ (line 5). Following Stravinsky’s detailed performing instructions such as ‘sur le sol’ (on the G-string), ‘glissez avec toute la longeur de l’archet jusqu’à la fin’ (use the entire bow) or ‘au talon’ (at the frog), the instruments generate a breathy and at times raucous timbre. The crudest sound is presented by the second violin. The four notes, which display the loudest dynamics (ff) of the piece, are again played ‘sur le sol du talon’ and, additionally, extremely secco (‘excessivement sec’), a sound effect created by the sequence of four up/downbows and staccatissimo accents (wedge-shaped accents as opposed to the dotted accents, such as in bars 5/6). Taken as a whole, the sound quality of the piece is dominated by rough noises, as Rudolf Stephan observes:

Already the complexion is singular: Noises such as glissandi, harsh grace notes, scratching at the bridge, playing at the frog, striking the string with the wood, pizzicato etc. are predominant. This prominence of noises has its function: the compositional detail is not to be lost in the comforting sound of the quartet.34

The prevalence of the compositional material, indicating a high degree of self-referentiality, is certainly characteristic of Stravinsky’s avant-garde aesthetics. The music’s harsh and unrefined sounds, however, also serve to represent the allegedly primitive and unrefined sound quality of peasant music which is portrayed in the piece.

While the sound descriptions in Lowell’s poem start off as rather accurate attributions to musical instruments, they increasingly develop into rather free associations regarding the market place setting. There are ‘thin Spring
leaves’ that ‘shake to the banging of shoes’ (lines 20–21) as well as ‘little pigs’ voices’ (line 25), obviously an association evoked by the croaking and grunting sound of the second violin.

Given the precision with which the poem represents the music, would it be right, however, to speak of Lowell’s poem as a mere replica of the music in another medium? Does the poetic adaptation simply involve a one-to-one reproduction without any degree of originality? Certainly not, even if Lowell, with regard to this translational experiment poses the question: ‘Could I reproduce the effect of the music in another medium?’\(^{35}\) In fact, this question provides a first clue. The reproduction of the music itself is not implied, but only the reproduction of its effect. Verbally imitating music by means of employing the transmedial features of rhythm and sound, the poem virtually mediates between the two art forms by taking up elements, or, according to Elleström,\(^{36}\) medial modes which are innate to both media and thus bridge the narrow gap between the already closely related art forms. Elleström’s assertion, that ‘media are both different and similar’, is perfectly illustrated by this example. The poem abounds with musical effects – in this regard it blends in with many other Modernist poems. On the other hand, however, the poem does not become music, nor can it be merely reduced to its experimental quality of transforming sounds into words, since it is important to maintain that intermedial translation, as I have claimed above, includes more than the structural and formal, but also touches upon on the cultural and aesthetic realm of a medium.

Interestingly, Lowell’s poem refers to a contemporary piece of music by a composer who was associated with the European avant-garde. Stravinsky’s pieces must have seemed extremely modern, unconventional and eccentric at the time, especially to the rather conservative audience of the Boston cultural elite. Taking up this particular piece of music, the poem thus self-reflexively positions itself in an avant-garde context. Besides, the poem takes up certain cultural themes which are inherent in the music or its titles and which are then developed and elaborated upon by means of semantization and cultural association. By turning to what is considered European Modernism, the poem consequently not only engages in intermedial translation, but at the same time also in a form of cultural translation. As has already become apparent in the analysis, one of the culturally relevant topics involved in both the music and this part of the poem is the discourse on folklore and primitivism in European and American Modernism.

Stravinsky overtly employs compositional devices associated with folk music. The notion of a peasant dance, which is evoked by both the original title ‘Dance’ and Stravinsky’s introduction, is thus also inherent in the compositional structure of the music, however alienated by Modernist compositional techniques. Stravinsky uses folkloristic elements not mainly as
a source of compositional material, but possibly to try to revive facets of a departing culture of the ‘Old Russia’, which he expected to find in the allegedly primitive Russian folk music, while at the same time embedding it within his experimental compositional practices.\textsuperscript{57} Elements of primitivism also enter Lowell’s poem. The depiction of the folk dance suggests not only an atmosphere full of different noises which appear simultaneously and thus evoke a chaotic scenery, but also give the impression of sensual and physical ecstasy. Allusions to ‘delirium flapping its thigh-bones’ (line 33), for instance, or ‘coarse stuffs and hot flesh weaving together’ (line 39) create an unrefined, sexual and almost vulgar atmosphere. The scene depicted expresses a high amount of energy, caused by the rhythmic use of words and the dynamic imagery employed. Not only the sexual imagery, but also the prominence of colours, such as ‘red, blue, yellow’ (line 34), blurred in a delirium-like state of ‘steaming’ ‘drunkenness’ (line 35) until they appear again in a different order ‘red, yellow, blue’ (line 36), add to an atmosphere frequently associated with a primitivist setting in literary modernism.

That Lowell was familiar with the primitivist discourse of her time becomes obvious in her essay, ‘Some Musical Analogies in Modern Poetry’:

It is obviously impossible to go back to the beginning of any art. That rhythm was the starting place of all, seems, however, practically indisputable. It would appear as though the more simple rhythms should have developed first, but that is lost in the mists of time. And it is a strange fact that now the savage or semi-civilized races employ exceedingly subtle rhythmic effects…. the complicated syncopation of the American negro has captivated the world under the vulgar and misleading name of ragtime. That he never learnt this from us is plain…. At what period did civilized man lose this power of retaining psychological beats in his head without necessarily expressing them?\textsuperscript{38}

This passage shows that Lowell, not being free from the prevalent racial ideologies of early Modernism, links her concept of the ‘primitive’ with the idea of a primal and an instinctive sense of rhythm, which has been lost in the civilization process and which has to be retained and rediscovered. The inherent irony of primitivism, the paradox between idealizing the ‘primitive’ as a means of criticizing one’s own society while on the other hand establishing and maintaining the border between ‘us’ and ‘them’ can well be observed in Lowell’s rhetoric, which draws a clear line between the ‘American negro’ and ‘us’. Lowell’s fascination for the ‘primitive’ is not particularly differentiated, for she subsumes various ethnic groups under the concept of the ‘savage’; the Egyptians she encountered during a boat trip on the Nile, the American Indian or the ‘American negro’. Because Lowell, as a Boston Brahmin, had no direct affiliation with the supposed primitive element of African-American culture, it was probably as ‘exotic’ and ‘foreign’ to her as different of Chinese cultures.
This is exactly where Lowell’s primitivism differs from Stravinsky’s interest in folk music. Although both utilize ‘primitive’ elements as compositional material, above all that of rhythm, their concepts of ‘primitivism’ are grounded on totally different premises. Whereas Stravinsky uses materials from the Russian folk tradition, belonging to his ‘own’ culture, Lowell has in mind foreign, remote cultures, the ‘other’. Her poem ‘Stravinsky’s Three Pieces “Grotesques”’ does not make explicit references to the Russian cultural context, but rather considers and portrays Russian folklore as one of many ‘primitive’ traditions. Russian folklore elements, which play a crucial part in Stravinsky’s Three Pieces, turn into ‘primitive’ elements, which are almost exchangeable, in Lowell’s text. While Stravinsky is interested in traces of a particularly Russian culture, Lowell engages in a more universal search for a primal state of being as a means of reinforcing modern civilization. Unlike Stravinsky, she does not turn to the ‘primitive’ in order to return to her own cultural identity, but rather to depart from it in favour of a turn to an imaginary pre-civilized state of mankind.

To conclude, Amy Lowell’s poem ‘Stravinsky’s Three Pieces for String Quartet’ exhibits processes of intermedial translation which engage both on a formal and cultural or aesthetic level. The poem verbally represents a piece of music by imitating and semanticizing it. Lowell’s translation not only attempts an accurate representation of the original, but also foregrounds the experimental borrowing of the material of the musical medium and thus self-reflexively comments on its own aesthetics, while emphasizing and appreciating its expressive potential. The poem also translates and thus transforms the music’s cultural ‘meaning’. In the imaginative description of the folk dance scene, Lowell creates her own response to the notion of the primal inherent in Stravinsky’s music. The Russian folk element captured in the music is translated into Lowell’s own cultural context and her particular version of ‘primitivism’. However, the processes of intermedial translation are not unidirectional. Not only can Lowell’s poem be understood as a potential program to the music, but the translation process itself elucidates and reflects upon the very quality of mediality. By ‘translating’ a piece of music, the verbal medium creates its own imagined version of the ‘other’ medium and at the same time also of its own medial status. Thus, in translating from music to literature, Lowell’s poem both overcomes and transcends medial, cultural and aesthetic boundaries, but at the same time illuminates medial differences, pointing to the very essence of their materiality.

Notes

1. ‘Imagine Media!’ is the title of the eighth conference of the Nordic Society for Intermedial Studies, held at Växjö University (from 2010: Linnaeus University), Sweden, 25–8 October 2007, where a preliminary version of this essay was first presented.


11. Cf. Irina Rajewsky, in this volume, for an overview of the terms describing processes of media transformation.


15. Ibid., p. 157.

16. Ibid., p. 7.


19. Ibid., p. 16.

20. The term ‘translation’ is also used in natural sciences, the science of religion and astrology; however, in all cases the basic notion of the term is the transformation of one state into another.


25. The term ‘intermedial translation’ has been used sporadically, for example, in the context of visual culture by Bal and Morra and by Dick Higgins with regard to sound poetry (‘A Taxonomy of Sound Poetry’). However, it has so far not been applied to the musico-literary context.

26. According to a review of the concert by Philip Hale in The Boston Herald (3 December 1915), a text was read in connection with the pieces, which unfortunately does not seem to exist anymore.

27. Although calling the pieces ‘Grotesques’, Stravinsky probably considered them as individual works grouped together arbitrarily, for the orchestrated version of 1928 (Four Studies for Orchestra) contains an additional fourth piece titled ‘Madrid’.


29. Since the contemporary pieces were played from manuscript by the players, Lowell did not have access to a score – the first printed edition was not published until 1922.

30. Considering some of the ideas put forward by Axel Englund in this volume, the explicit and exact reference to the music’s title could be regarded as indicative of a metaphorical relationship between poem and music, since the poem represents and thereby purports to be music, its medial ‘other’.

31. The direct imitation of musical rhythms corresponds with Lowell’s understanding of poetic rhythm as set out in her essay ‘Some Musical Analogies’ (at p. 139, see below note 34). Experimenting with the possibilities of free verse, Lowell takes music, especially that of Debussy, as a model. Due to its neglect of syllables in favour of equally long time-units, free verse acquires a musical flow which is not dominated by regular meters, but instead by larger time divisions. As a result, single word lines, which are often onomatopoeic sound imitations, such as ‘Whee-e-e!’ (line 12) are of the same length as lines with more words and syllables and thus create a musical resonance and reverberation. Due to their exposed position and the combination of the voiced glide /w/ and the long, shrill /i/, they have a similar effect as the accented quarter notes of the first violin, slurred into an eighth note g (for example, bars 7/8). The rhythmical effect of free verse is supported by a frequent use of sharp consonants, especially fricatives, affricates and stops as in ‘screeching thread’ (line 3), ‘sabots slapping’ (line 13) or ‘shaking and cracking’ (line 14).


33. At the end of the piece Strawinsky demands sans talent in order to make it explicit that a ritardando is not intended.
